

Message Text

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SUBJ: OFFICIAL SOVIET CULTURE: YOUNG ARTISTS' EXHIBIT AT THE
MANEGE

REF: MOSCOW 13354

1. EMBOFF VISITED THE CURRENT YOUNG ARTISTS' EXHIBIT AT THE CENTRAL EXHIBIT HALL (THE MANEGE) IN MOSCOW. THE EXPERIENCE PROVIDED AN INSTRUCTIVE CONTRAST TO AN EARLIER ART EXHIBIT WE SAW FEATURING AVANT-GUARDE ARTISTS AT THE MOSCOW ARTISTS' UNION BUILDING (SEE REFTEL). THE LATTER WAS MUCH SMALLER IN SIZE AND, ALTHOUGH OF UNEVEN QUALITY, NEVERTHELESS CHARACTERIZED BY ART WHICH WAS INNOVATIVE, HIGHLY INDIVIDUAL (BY SOVIET STANDARDS) AND REPRESENTING A CLEAR BREAK WITH OFFICIALLY-APPROVED CANONS OF SOCIALIST REALISM. THE YOUNG ARTISTS, ON THE OTHER HAND DID NOT STRAY FAR FROM DULL CONFORMITY IN DEPICTING HEROIC WORKERS, HAPPY COMBINE OPERATORS, AND CONSTRUCTION SITES IN RUGGED WILDERNESS AREAS.

2. PAINTINGS TENDED TO BE BIG, AS THOUGH SIZE ALONE INSURED QUALITY, A DEPRESSINGLY LARGE NUMBER FEATURED BRIGHT CHEERFUL DEPICTIONS OF FACTORY OR KOLKHOZ LIFE
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OR STIFF, VACANT-EYED FIGURES REMINISCENT OF U.S.

DEPRESSION PERIOD WPA MURALS. MUCH OF IT WILL UNDOUBTEDLY END UP HANGING ON THE WALLS OF FACTORY CONFERENCE ROOMS AND OFFICES OF KOLKHOZ CHAIRMEN. SCULPTURE DID NOT STRAY FAR BEYOND HEROIC THEMES AND OFTEN BROKE FRESH GROUND IN VULGARITY AND TASTELESSNESS. WITH A FEW EXCEPTIONS, PORTRAITS WERE EQUALLY DEPRESSING AND SINGULARLY LACKING IN PERCEPTION OF CHARACTER--WHETHER FROM THE ARTIST'S INABILITY TO DEPICT IT OR THE ABSENCE OF INDIVIDUALITY IN THE "AVERAGE" WORKER OR KOLKHOZNIK, SUBJECT.

3. AMONG THE HUGE QUANTITY OF JUNK, HOWEVER, IT WAS POSSIBLE TO DISCERN OCCASIONAL SIGNS OF TALENT AND TECHNICALLY SKILLFUL AND EVEN IMAGINATIVE WORK WITHIN THE LIMITS PRESCRIBED FOR ACCEPTABLE ART. ARTISTS FROM ARMENIA, GEORGIA, AND CENTRAL ASIA PROVIDED SPLASHES AND SWIRLS OF VIVID COLOR AND EXOTIC SUBJECT MATTER. THOSE FROM THE BALTIC STATES OFFERED SOPHISTICATED ENGRAVINGS AND PRINTS OF NUDES AS WELL AS HANDSOME SCANDINAVIAN-STYLE WOOL WALL HANGINGS AND TAPESTRIES. SKETCHES OF STAGE SETS FOR THEATER AND OPERA PROVIDED OPPORTUNITIES FOR HOLD EXPERIMENTAL CONCEPTS. ALTHOUGH VISITORS TENDED TO WALK PAST MOST OF THE EXHIBITS QUICKLY, SOME ATTRACTED CLUSTERS OF ADMIRERS.

4. COMMENT: THIS EXHIBIT STRENGTHENS OUR IMPRESSIONS, FORMED OVER THE LAST 12 MONTHS OR SO, THAT SOVIET ART IS NOT NECESSARILY GOOD IF IT IS UNOFFICIAL OR NONREPRESENTATIONAL, NOR IS IT NECESSARILY BAD IF IT HAPPENS TO BE OFFICIAL AND REPRESENTATIONAL. INDEED, WE HAVE SEEN AN AWFUL LOT OF THIRD RATE UNOFFICIAL ART SINCE THE SUMMER OF 1975. NEVERTHELESS, THE VISIT TO THE MANEGE HAS CONVINCED US THAT BAD OFFICIAL ART IS FAR, FOR WORSE THAN BAD UNOFFICIAL ART--AND, OF COURSE, THERE IS MUCH MORE OF IT AROUND IN BOTH RELATIVE AND ABSOLUTE TERMS. MOREOVER, GOOD OFFICIAL ART TENDS TO BE "OFFICIAL" ONLY IN THE SENSE THAT THE CENSOR DID NOT RECOGNIZE IT FOR WHAT IT REALLY IS--A STEP BY THE ARTIST AWAY FROM OFFICIAL STRICTURES AND TOWARD THE DEVELOPMENT OF A UNIQUE PERSONAL PERCEPTION.
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